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HISTORY'S PLAYTHING - AMERICAN DREAM OR AMERICAN NIGHTMARE: A STUDY
OF PHILIP ROTH'S "AMERICAN PASTORAL"

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ABSTRACT

Human beings strived for a better life since the beginning. Mankind witnessed a never ending race for happiness, wealth, power and superiority. Many revolutions changed the course of history and became watershed events having great impact on the human life. While some of the ideas lived on, some of the ideas were short-lived. American Dream was one of such ideas which laid the foundation for the making of United States of America. The Statue of Liberty itself symbolizes the idea of the Great American Dream. The celebrated idea of American Dream had tremendous impact on the entire nation and influenced each and every individual in some way or the other. In fact, it became a significant subject in the course of history and played a quintessential role in American literature.

The present article is a study of Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), winner of highly acclaimed Pulitzer Prize. It discusses the course of American history from the 1940s, the disappointments and horrors of the 1960s, and the devastating effects of a country divided over the Vietnam War. It deals with the impact of Vietnam War, and its influence on the Americans, especially the Jewish Americans. An effort is made to unravel a story which describes father-daughter relations, Jewish assimilation, political fanaticism, familial loyalty and betrayal. the great cultural devastation and tragedy.

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American Pastoral (1997) is the twenty-second book of Philip Roth, a prolific writer. The novel is a winner of the highly acclaimed Pulitzer prize which explores the nature of community and belonging, father-daughter relations, Jewish assimilation, political fanaticism, familial loyalty and betrayal. It is a novel which describes the times of the Vietnam War, and its influence on the Americans, especially the Jewish Americans. Roth started writing the novel at the end of the Vietnam War which was one of the shattering national events of his adulthood. Through the novel, Roth discusses the course of American history from the 1940s, the

disappointments and horrors of the 1960s, and the devastating effects of a country divided over the Vietnam War.

Pastoral is something which has utopian longing. The pastoral was initially originated by the Greek poet Theocritus and the Latin poet Virgil, who wrote poems about the shepherds ('pastor' is Latin for 'shepherd'). In Shostak's book *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, the traditional pastoral is described as: 'a deliberate conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of the shepherds and other rural folk in idealized natural settings' (qtd. in. Shostak 34). In *American Pastoral*, Roth presents the story of Levovs, an American family, who in search of the American dream, gain wealth and success, but suffers from heartache and pain due to the adverse situations. In a way, it is similar to the story of Job in the Holy Bible, in which Job's life moves from one phase to another, from poverty to riches, and then back to the former. The novel consciously alludes to Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, both thematically and formally, with the Jewish post-war acquisition and loss of an American Eden.

American Pastoral revolves around Seymour (the Swede) Levov, the protagonist of the novel; a Jew immigrated to America and settled in Newark, New Jersey. The novel gives an account on two generations of Levovs family, descendents of immigrants Jews, who live the American dream and have a successful custom glove manufacturing business in Newark. The Levovs make many sacrifices over the years to be successful. Tragedy strikes the Swede's life who aims for the perfect American life and the local adolescent hero of the novel faces a downfall resulting from his daughter's terrorist actions. Roth describes the triumphs and tribulations of the Levov's family in building the family business over two generations. Speaking about Roth's family drama, Stanley in 'Mourning the 'Greatest Generation': Myth and History in Philip Roth's 'American Pastoral' says, 'Encapsulating this struggle in a private family drama, Roth examines the assault against historical metanarratives that constitute the American mythic ideal, interrogating a consensus ideology reflected in a modernist vision of history and literary theory' (Stanley 2).

Nathan Zuckerman appears as the narrator and gives an account of Seymour the Swede Levov's glorious high school days. He meets former classmate Jerry Levov at the reunion in 1995, who describes the tragic life of his deceased older brother, Seymour Levov, an iconic figure in school days. Zuckerman recreates the life story of Seymour based on Jerry's revelation, a few newspaper clippings, and his own impressions. The Swede is a legendary all-star athlete, a tall and handsome American hero, an outstanding man in every aspect, confident of his future and revered in his community.

THE SWEDE. During the war years, when I was still a grade school boy, this was a magical name in our Newark neighborhood, even to adults just a generation removed from the city's old Prince Street ghetto and not yet so flawlessly Americanized as to be bowled over by the prowess of a high school athlete. The name was magical; so was the anomalous face. Of the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov. (AP 3)

Zuckerman regards 1940s America as a golden period, and 1960s and 1970s as a period of social upheaval. In the postwar years, the Swede marries Dawn Dwyer, a beautiful 'post-Catholic' Irish beauty queen, Miss New Jersey, who wants to be more than just a beautiful face. The Swede is an American icon; a hero enlisted in the Marines but spared going to war, a successful businessman, a person devoted to his family, an ideal husband and father, who loves to live a peaceful and pastoral life in the rural Old Rimrock area of New Jersey. He is the third-generation inheritor of the American dream who abruptly becomes 'history's plaything' (87).

Merry, the daughter of the Swede plays a significant role in the novel. She is a sixteen-year-old daughter, a rebellious girl, who plants a bomb in the local post office, with the influence of the anti-Vietnam war movement. The explosion kills one person shattering the idyllic life of her father Swede. The year of 1968 becomes a fatal day for the Swede as his beautiful American dream deserts him. Merry, the loving and quick-

witted girl turn into a fanatical teenager, capable of acting on behalf of savage political terrorism. The Swede is wrenched out of the 'American Pastoral' into the indigenous American berserk.

The novel gives details of the American history from the years following World War II to the 1990s, which actually coincides with his own experiences. The novel moves back and forth in time, as the Swede tries to unearth the reasons for the sudden outburst and destruction. The narrator, Zuckerman contemplates about the very thing that must have baffled the Swede:

I began to contemplate the very thing that must have baffled the Swede till the moment he died: how had he become history's plaything? History, American history, the stuff you read about in books and study in school, had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock, New Jersey, to countryside where it had not put in an appearance that was notable since Washington's army twice wintered in the highlands adjacent to Morristown. History, which had made no drastic impingement on the daily life of the local populace since the Revolutionary War, wended its way back out to these cloistered hills and, improbably, with all its predictable unforeseenness, broke helter-skelter into the orderly household of the Seymour Levovs and left the place in a shambles. People think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing. (87)

American Pastoral is the exploration of what went wrong in the American dream, rather than the usual personal and psychological angst depicted in Roth's fiction. The novel begins with Nathan Zuckerman's encounter with Swede for the first time in nearly half a century since high school, where he finds him still as the emblem of perfection he used to be – self assured, handsome, and wealthy. Swede enjoys a great career right from his school age where he is a heroic sports figure who later on joins the marines and marries Miss New Jersey of 1949: 'The Swede starred as end in football, center in basketball, and first baseman in baseball' (3). He becomes a successful glove manufacturer, moving from Old Weequahic Jewish neighborhood to Old Rimrock. Swede as a real American ideal with a combination of heroic qualities and extreme modesty is found uninteresting to Zuckerman. Swede's life is merely perfection which lacks conflict, interest, depth, and just keeps unraveling.

According to Zuckerman, the life of the Swede is like a ball of fluffy yarn. However, Zuckerman comes to know the tragedy that filled the Swede's life upon his death and the novelist is compelled to explain to himself how he could have failed to recognize Swede's distress. The rest of the story gives an account of Zuckerman's imaginative reconstruction of the Swede's past, a psychodrama predicated at least in part on Zuckerman's egotistical need to explain the failure of him being so unobservant. The exploration of the Swede's tragedy leads to the exploration of America's tragedy of the late twentieth century, which Roth captures in the title of the book, as well as in the titles of its three principal sections, 'Paradise Remembered,' 'The Fall,' and 'Paradise Lost.' The three sections of the novel echo both *Genesis* of Bible and Milton's great epic *Paradise Lost*. The Swede is Roth's Jewish American Adam who achieves 'his version of paradise' in the guise of 'the longed-for American pastoral' (86). Roth warns that the 'idealized mythology' of the nation would be ruptured by the 'demonic reality' of the sixties (78). Merry, the radical daughter of Swede, 'transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk' (86).

The novel has some of the elements of Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, which deals with the fall of man. *American Pastoral* does not introduce its hero, the Swede until the second section/book, similar to *Paradise Lost*'s hero Adam. The initial pages reveal the history of the hero. The opening section of the novel, 'Paradise Remembered' presents the forty-fifth reunion of the Weequahic Class of 1950. *American Pastoral* depicts the paradise as a post-war/ post-depression America, in which young second-generation Jews did not share the 'uncertainties' of their parents and assimilate into the American way-of-life without difficulty.

Though Roth is known as a compulsively ironizing novelist, he treats Swede sympathetically, portraying him as a product of his immigrant father's drive for success of the self-assurance, instilled in the immediate postwar generation, and of the Jewish community's need to become assimilated and established. He represents the heroes who are unconscious expressions of collective need. He has been bright, beautiful,

and prosperous, married the ideal girl, and consistently worked for the growth of his business. The novel describes the Swede's pride in his career and his extensive knowledge as a glove manufacturer, and what they meant to him, to his employees, to his family and to his community. He is thoughtful and sensitive in understanding his wife's interests of having her own identity, rather than just being a lady of beauty, and fulfilling her desire to have a business of her own. He has raised his daughter to the best of his ability giving her the best of what all she needs. He is a hard working man and always does what is right. As Newark faces the crisis of violence and destruction, he is the last person to relocate his business. His unpreparedness for the sixties turmoil puts him in trouble which appears like foolishness on his part. However, Roth exculpates Swede, which is unlike his usual response to his characters in the past. Merry, the Swede, and Dawn Dwyer are against the Vietnam War, but Merry's reckless actions destroy the certainties of the Swede. However, one cannot conclude that Merry's anti-war ambition was wrong.

The Swede is a parent who never neglected his child, and hence seems more as a victim than a victimizer of his rebellious child. The father and daughter become victims caught in the web of a mysterious calamity. Merry represents every child of the sixties who is destructive and inexplicable. She is an extension of every parent's nightmare of sixties, stuck in bizarre phenomenon. Roth deals with all of his characters, the Swede, his demanding father, his daughter, and his wife, the ineffectual and deceitful therapist, the academic nihilist, and Swede's outrageous brother as victims of a complex, historical moment. He gives an insight into the historical period in which every individual got involved directly or indirectly.

While studying the novel, the critics like David Brauner and Debra Shostak have focused on the identity of the nation - the death of the American Dream and the apocalyptic landscape of the novel, and the protagonist's denial of his ethnic/Jewish identity. Roth considers the characters as history's hostages. The transformation of Merry shatters Swede's dreams. Merry who used to be a cheerful daughter evolves into an anti-war, anti-American radical, rejecting the family wealth, and embracing anti-capitalist politics. She murders four people by planting deadly bombs. She gets frustrated over the entire episode of the Vietnam War and finds that even her family isn't really interested in such a sensitive issue. While discussing on the Vietnam War with her father, she lets out her emotions:

. . . that's why I have to go to New York. B-b-b-because people there do feel responsible. They feel responsible when America b-blows up Vietnamese villages. They feel responsible when America is b-blowing little b-babies to b-b-b-b-bits. B-but you don't, and neither does Mother. You don't care enough to let it upset a single day of yours. You don't care enough to make you spend another night somewhere. You don't stay up at night worrying about it. You don't really care, Daddy, one way or the other. (107)

Merry makes an attempt to awaken the Swede's sympathy for the people who are not considered as the 'authentic' center of the society. In frustration, Merry yells: 'All you can think about, all you can talk about, all you c-c-care about is the well-being of this f-fucking I-I-little f-f-family!' (107). The Swede in a constructive way replies that America's mission is to export a homogenized, middleclass, cornucopian construct of life: 'You are angry about the families in Vietnam. You are angry about their being destroyed. Those are families too. Those families are just like ours that would like to have the right to have lives like our family has. Isn't that what you yourself want for them?' (108). According to Gentry, the conversion of Merry turns the tables on the Swede giving him his own medicine: 'When Merry becomes a Jain and torments her father from a passive position of moral rectitude, she is giving her father his own medicine' (Gentry 81). Merry's conversion to Jainism completely differs from her parents ideologies and she is misled by her radical frame of mind. She doesn't belong to WASP anymore and is never a parent, a homemaker or even a complete adult. Merry neither takes up the responsibilities of the family nor takes the position of a good daughter. She loses everything trying to handle the complex world by herself. The Swede is bound to his role as a father, 'the dependable father whose center is the source of all order . . . and whose center could not . . . sanction the smallest sign of chaos' (AP 231). Merry transforms herself into a self-righteous juggernaut of the revolution beyond reason and beyond understanding. Recognizing the irony of Merry's political stance, her mother Dawn yells, 'You're not antiwar,'

'you're antieverything' (102). Trying to fight against one version of evil, Merry transforms herself into another type of negating evil, leading to a disaster which leaves behind many broken bodies and wounded people. She becomes lifeless, a traumatic self and Caputo cautions saying, 'If what we seek is universal agreement, if we were all to speak with universal reason, we would be reduced first to sameness and then to silence' (Caputo 40).

The novel presents the destruction of the American pastoral dream due to the clash between the ideal American father and a radical American daughter. Merry's radical instinct goes so far that she doesn't even need her home anymore, 'she had discovered she no longer needed a home' (AP 258). The element of postmodernism is evident in Merry's behavior and she is found unpredictable, unknowable, and contradictory. Merry in one of her conversations with her father says, 'I don't want to be understood—I want to be f-f-f-free!' (107). The bomb itself symbolizes the radicalism of the Sixties in the novel. At the end of the novel, the exasperated Swede says, 'If only Merry had fought a war of words, fought the world with words alone Then Merry's would be not a story that begins and ends with a bomb but another story entirely. But a bomb. A bomb. A bomb tells the whole fucking story' (340-41).

Commenting on *American Pastoral*, Laura Tanenbaum says that the novel, 'undermines its own most vivid historical insight: the denial that lies at the heart of the Swede's own vision of an American pastoral without history, violence, or complicity' (Laura 52). Zuckerman finds that tragedy entered into Seymour's life and he is filled with pain, 'Instead he is plagued with shame and uncertainty and pain for the rest of his life' (AP 68). Roth brings the ethical undercurrent which arises from the tensions caused by the counter voices of Merry and other characters. Roth makes the *American Pastoral* a formidable serious novel which invites the reader to think beyond what the novel offers.

Merry, the innocent daughter of the Swede is inexplicably transformed into a vile murderer, becoming a symbol for the whole of the sixties movements, an American nightmare. The Swede does not believe the fact that his daughter could have acted in this manner on her own. Zuckerman writes about Merry that, 'Assembling bombs had become her specialty after she'd successfully planted her second and third. . . . That's when the stuttering first began to disappear. She never stuttered when she was with the dynamite' (259). Thus destruction becomes a form of representation to those without a political voice.

Though Merry converted to Jainism, an atheistical Indian philosophy which advocates the ethical principle of nonviolence, the complexity and bewilderment of the 60s makes her resort to violence. She becomes a symbol of 60s youth, a victim in her own way, caught up in the turmoil, trying to define life and seeking answers for everything. However, the 60s revolution had mixed reactions too and most of the former radicals found their way to return to the social body and to the mainstream society wherein they became mainstream faculty, bankers, politicians and occupied some of the important positions in America.

Merry's actions leave her parents in bewilderment and both the parents decide to live trying to forget their past, their horror, retreating into innocence. Merry's mother decides to have a facelift, build a new house, and accept a new lover in her life: 'She thinks our catastrophe is over and so she is going to bury the past and start anew—face, house, husband, all new' (AP 366). The Swede opts for a new life and gets married once again. He lives pretending to be normal with his new wife and family, suppressing his past, 'for the sake of their naïve wholeness' (AP 81). The Swede lives a dual life:

Never again will the Swede be content in the trusting old Swedian way that, for the sake of his second wife and their three boys—for the sake of their naïve wholeness—he ruthlessly goes on pretending to be. Stoically he suppresses his horror. He learns to live behind a mask. A lifetime experiment in endurance. A performance over a ruin. Swede Levov lives a double life. (81)

Neither of the parents find a way to come to terms with the ideological challenge embodied by Merry falling a prey to the mid-century crisis. Instead of finding a way, they resort to a nostalgic search for a 'mid-century innocence' that never existed.

The concluding section of the novel shows Seymour and Merry's conversation. Seymour cannot take Merry home as she is totally transformed into a filthy and foreign body. The Swede heads home to his dinner

party, as a daughterless father, in disappointment. Zuckerman returns with the authorial voice and delivers a dramatic charade at the culminating scene of the novel:

They'll never recover. Everything is against them, everyone and everything that does not like their life.

All the voices from without, condemning and rejecting their life! And what is wrong with their life?

What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs? (AP 123)

Merry's counter pastoral and counter hegemonic ways with her refusal to the Swede's ideology ruptures his pastoral dream betraying his innocent vision. Merry is not anymore a sweet smiling little child but a forgotten girl of her parents. She is a representative of a nationalistic pastoral politics in the age of postmodern rupture. Roth through his novel discusses about the disrupted history, the demonic reality of the counterpastoral, and the scars that still remain in America's heart.

Roth with the character of an American hero explores the politics of the American myth and the tendency to rewrite the historical events to continue the myth. Setting his alter-ego once again on the center stage as a narrator, Roth deals with the subject of counter-realities that sublimate the actual realities within historic memory. Despite of the demolition of the American Dream, Roth ends up clinging to certain pastoral ideas contrasting the wonderful lost America of his Newark childhood of the 40s to the fallen America of the 50s and 60s. Roth eulogizes 'the greatest generation,' living with a legacy of the counterpastoral impulse, in which the historical and literary grand metanarratives are held suspect. Thus, *American Pastoral* is the classical tragic romance of the 'greatest generation,' a cautionary tale of pastoral innocence, which escapes the burden of history rather than confronting it. It may not be seen as an allegory but as a novel about constructing allegories.

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